

Obstinacy

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The Egyptians claimed that the Financial Adviser had counseled the Egyptian government not to rush into building the Gebel Aulia dam; the Egyptians then confirmed this claim and made it certain, and the newspapers published it! And we, along with them, asked the government to make plain to the people where the truth of the matter lay. The English, in turn, began to claim and to publish, just as the Egyptians had claimed and published, that the Financial Adviser does not now advise proceeding with this project. And everything suggests that the English will, in the end, become certain of it, just as the Egyptians once claimed it and then became certain of it themselves. It is, then, established — until the Egyptian government says otherwise — that the man whom the English government insists on keeping in his post in Egypt, as overseer of Egypt's financial conduct, does not wish to bear the responsibility of silence over this strange conduct in this notorious crisis. This means, as we said before, that the English adviser does not hesitate to override his own English sentiments, to set aside English interests, and to declare to the government a written opinion — namely, that it would be more correct to postpone the project now.

All this remains true until the government denies it plainly and clearly, in a denial unclouded by the vagueness and ambiguity that has clouded the Minister of Public Works' position on this project. The government may, then, proceed with building the reservoir without the English bearing any responsibility whatsoever for it, once their own overseer of our financial conduct has advised patience and prudence in a counsel free of all ambiguity or vagueness. If there is any responsibility to be borne, it is official Egypt alone that must bear it — for the people have come to hate the project, have declared their hatred of it, and have insisted on abandoning or postponing it; and because the English — for all their fondness for the project, their eagerness for it, and their expectation of various benefits from it — have nonetheless advised, through the voice of the Financial Adviser, that it be postponed and approached with patience.

It is of no concern to us, as we said before, whether the English intention behind this advice was sincere or not, nor whether this advice suited their hopes and their private designs. What concerns us alone is

the official appearance of the matter. And if the Egyptian people — who will pay for this project, and who will bear its harmful effects or enjoy its beneficial ones — hate it and insist on abandoning it; and if the English themselves advise postponing it and proceeding with patience in its execution, then it is only right that any sensible person should ask: what, then, is the purpose of the government's going ahead with this project? For whom does the government wish to build the reservoir, when the Egyptians have come to hate it, and the English have shown their indifference to it?

It is right that any sensible person should ask this question, and it is right that the government should answer this question, and answer it plainly and clearly. We believe the government will agree with us that the age in which peoples were compelled, against their will, to do what they did not wish; in which their masters and leaders declared that they were benefiting them despite themselves, and securing their good against their own wishes — that age has passed, and its traces have faded. Peoples now recognize their right to want or not to want, to benefit or not to benefit. Modern life has swept away the infallibility once attributed to masters and leaders, and has stripped them of their immunity from error, so that they have become men like other men — men whom office no longer clothes with sovereignty over nations, nor establishes upon the earth, nor allows to force peoples to do what they do not wish. They have become, instead, men whom the peoples hire to secure their hopes and their common good as the peoples themselves wish it, not as the rulers themselves wish it. If their views happen to agree with the views of the peoples, so be it; but if not, they are bound to submit to the people's view, and to relinquish their posts.

Sovereignty has passed, in these days, from the rulers to the ruled; the ruled have become the masters, and the rulers have become servants who work at their command and carry out their judgment. I know that this is talk the government might smile at, in a kind of mockery and derision, since it neither accepts it nor believes in it; but I also know that this is the very talk the people alone accept and believe, in which they find reassurance, and which they see as a true mirror of the feeling, filling their souls, of their own sovereignty and their unqualified right to oversee public affairs.

The people, then, do not want this reservoir now, and the English neither press for it nor insist upon it — so for whom is the government building it?

Let us set theories aside. Had the government been inclined to conceive of its relationship with the people along these lines we have described — one resting on the sovereignty of the people alone — it would have spared itself this unending reproach, and spared us this long, happy era of its tenure, and would have relinquished power and its offices long ago.

Let us, then, set these theories aside, and ask the government what practical benefit it expects for itself from building this reservoir, now that it has become plain and clear that the nation expects no good from it at present. Governments undertake grave enterprises for one of two reasons: either to secure some general public benefit, or to secure some particular political benefit. What, then, is this particular political benefit which the government hopes to secure by building this reservoir?

It is as though people were saying that the government seeks, through this reservoir, to curry favor with the English, so that the ministry may remain in office. But the English are not now pressing for this reservoir — so does the government think it dignified to indulge in such insistence to the point of placing itself in the position of one who would force the English to secure their own interests, and compel them to fulfill their own political aims against their will? And is it in the government's own particular political interest, in the eyes of the Egyptians and of the English themselves, that it should be said of it that it guards British interests more zealously than Great Britain herself guards them?

I do not know whether the government is in earnest, or merely jesting. There is nothing of earnestness in its insistence on building the reservoir despite the Egyptians, and despite the official English advice; and this is not a matter suited to jesting — what a jest it would be, one that exposes the finances of the state to disorder!

The Minister of Public Works has a remark not without wit, though it is also not without a lesson and a warning. He said to some journalists who spoke with him a few days ago: "Bring us four times the water we now have, and we shall know how to distribute it."

It is certain the Minister of Public Works would not find it difficult to cope with several times the water we now have — and what could be easier, after all, than distribution and dispersal? The government furnishes clear and decisive proof, every single day, that distribution itself is neither a miracle nor a hardship; the true miracle, the true

hardship, is productive distribution — distribution that actually benefits. The government distributes the state's funds until it must borrow, and it is quite capable of emptying whatever it borrows until it is forced to borrow yet again. The Minister of Finance himself, or his deputy, might just as well say: "Bring us several times the money we now have, and we shall know how to spend it." Nothing is easier than spending; the real question is to know whether this spending is beneficial or harmful, whether it does good or none at all.

Water can certainly be made to increase — a path may be cleared for it to the sea, or a path cleared for it to the desert, or it may simply be left free to overflow and claim everything in its path. But the question the Minister of Public Works has said nothing about is his capacity, or his incapacity, to distribute this water in such a way as to bring forth fertility and prosperity in the land of Egypt.

And it appears — so it is said — that the Minister of Public Works once believed, at some point, that this productive, beneficial distribution was, at the very least, no easy matter just now. How fitting it would be, then, for the Minister of Public Works — now that circumstances have placed the affairs of the Ministry of Finance in his hands as well — to consider that spending money, however easy it may be, may sometimes cost such hardship and difficulty to raise that it drives governments and nations to bankruptcy. And how fitting it would be, now that circumstances have placed financial affairs in his hands, that he should not himself pave Egypt's way toward this very evil which the English Financial Adviser so fears — the evil against which he advises the government to wait.